The Nation and Marginal Imagination

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History is the cruelest of all the events in the annals of human civilization because it lives within us despite the fact that it occurred decades, centuries, or even millennia ago. Not only this, it also underpins our notions related to truth, identity, culture, and self. Owing to its permeation in the present, history is considered not only as a study of the past, but also of the present. Seen in this way, humans, unlike animals, appear to be more a product of history than biology for the former makes humans conscious of their being in the world. Therefore, human beings can be called a historical animal.

So the question arises here what is the method to identify the historical movements, shifts, ruptures, and intersections that have contributed to our existing status or identity within the particular space of nation? This essay attempts to explore this question in the domain of politics of imagination with special reference to a marginal region of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan. The purpose is to explicate the processes that subjugate us to the dominant narrative of identity, and make a case for plural identities inhabiting the margins of center.

To do this, I will be excavating the archeology of imagination. Unlike the subjective view of imagination, this essay deems imagination as a political and social construct. The modern state creates collective social imaginary by colonializing the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) of the cultural communes[1] on the margins. Liberation of imagination and social imaginary enables society to take imaginative leaps for alternate thought and represent itself. Consequently, it leads to creation of physical spaces for the celebration of alterity within the modernist paradigm of meta-identity of the nation state.

The region of Gilgit-Baltistan is situated in the northernmost part of Pakistan. It became part of Pakistan after the partition of Indian sub-continent in 1947. Although it is an administrative part of Pakistan, it is not the constitutional part of Pakistan. It is a region ruled through administrative apparatus sans political rights. Owing to the dominance of administrative apparatus and absence of local center of power for last 70 years, the identity of Gilgit-Baltistan has remained in limbo.

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[1] I am using terms after modifying Benedict Anderson's thesis of imagined communities for political community to anthropological term of cultural commune. For Anderson, political community is imagined because "in the mind of each members of nation lives the image of their communion." Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, (India: Rawat Publications, 2006). Cultural commune is the one where its members are well aware of their communion with people who inhabit different state but share cultural imaginaire across borders with their fellow brethren.

The existing identity of the region is solely dependent on the definition manufactured by the state. Its marginality is further enhanced by the absence of power after the abolition of local principalities in Gilgit-Baltistan during the second half of the twentieth century. Several factors and processes have contributed to complete hegemony of the state narrative or identity. First and foremost is the geographical mutation of the region and redrawing of boundaries of nation states in High Asia in the twentieth century. The geographical mutilation led to cultural disintegration and marginalization. In the absence of local power and cultural centers, and disintegration of culture and traditional worldview, a lacuna has emerged that is filled by the processes introduced by modern state and modernity.

The traditional worldview of Gilgit-Baltistan emerged in response to the climatic conditions and geography conditions. It took social forms in the shape of social structure and cultural ethos. So the collective consciousness of the cultural mind of Gilgit-Baltistan is like a tree whose historical roots are entrenched in the soil of Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrian, Bon, and shamanism. Bon religion predates Buddhism in the region. Shamanism was indigenous proto-religion. The practice of Islam in Gilgit-Baltistan includes local cultural elements. However, none of the cultural genealogies, historical developments, and sources of self are taught to new generation. Consequently, the education system manufactures a mind that is invested with imagery of nation and divested of collective cultural imaginaire.[2]

Unlike other regions of Pakistan, historically Gilgit-Baltistan remained immune from the major historical events engulfing South Asia. It is only with the arrival of British, it got connected with South Asia. It has become part of Pakistan with different historical memory and experience. However, the official historiography has not accommodated the different historical memory in the history books. Also, historical landmarks and monuments are erased to recreate spaces that reflect physical existence of the power of the nation in physical landscape of Gilgit-Baltistan. Even when a historical event is embodied in the shape of monuments, the local details are omitted. Instead of local, the national content is inserted so that future generation will become oblivious of her own history. For example, the government has made a mural on the wall of memorial of the War of Independence of Gilgit-Baltistan in 2018. The mural depicts a picture of 1947 where soldiers of Gilgit Scouts are carrying a flag of Gilgit-Baltistan after gaining independence from Dogra rule of Kashmir. However, with the sleight of hand the local flag is replaced with Pakistani flag. This is the distortion of a historical event that was well documented visually.

The mural is situated within the vicinity of Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA). This clearly shows how power of central is obliterating memory and historical imagination in

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[2] English translation of the French word "imaginaire" into "imaginary" does not convey richness of meaning in French. Imaginaire means a mental picture engrained in our mind. I see it as mind's eye of the worldview.

the very space that symbolizes collective will of people in Gilgit-Baltistan. Thus, the expunging of historical narrative of the region from official history has contributed to collective historical amnesia. Famous Shina poet Jan Ali expresses the sense of local deprivation and too much dependency of Gilgit-Baltistan on the rulers in the center through his poetry. In one of his poems he laments dismal state of affairs because locals are so dependent on power in the center that they wait for an edict on the piece of paper to be arrived in Gilgit, and dispensation of justice from the center: "The paper bearing order comes from the South, and judiciary is also appointed from the South (*Nay kaghaz ga khairo waey, to adalat ga khairo waey*)."

Similarly, the education curriculum does not incorporate heterogeneous histories of diverse cultural communities in Pakistan. Instead, the exogenous historical figures, events, discourses and literary works have been inculcated in the imagination to create a national imaginary, which explains the existing order of things to the self. However, it has robed the self of her own imagination and cultural literacy. As a corollary, an alienated self has emerged in the social space. It is a self that can relate herself with literary and intellectual sources from outside, but cannot make sense of her society in her own cultural metaphors.

Another element that contributes to the expunging of local cultural imagination is decades-old sectarian strife and emerging religiosity. Sectarianism has created a divisive narrative by creating internal "Others." This process of othering has impacted cultural spheres as well as social structures and arrangements. Now the multiplicity of associations and identities is reduced to single identity marker of sect. It is through the sole marker of sectarian identity, a new self has been formed who views the world through sectarian lens. As a corollary, the erstwhile multi religious and culturally diverse Gilgit city and its rural areas have been purged of people belong to "other" sects though they are from the same ethnic group and language. The sectarian mindset has poisoned the local imagination so much that people even deem eating food prepared by the opponent sect as anathema (*haram).*

In addition to inwardly altering cultural imagination, sectarianism has changed the very cultural outlook. The monomaniac sectarian mindset of the society has reduced polysemy of symbols into single meaning. Until now local people used traditional cap to cover head while offering prayers. It was normal to have cultural attire of cloak and cap for religious activities. Now exogenous gowns, caps, turbans have replaced the traditional attire and cap in most of the areas in Gilgit-Baltistan. Previously, beard had more cultural connotations than sectarian identity marker. Today, beard has become a marker of sectarian affiliation. According to the schema of sectarian imagination, long beard means that the person hails from Sunni sect, short beard betokens that the person is Shia, and clean shave means the person belongs to Ismaili sect. It has resulted in change of semiotic universe of the society of Gilgit-Baltistan.

By altering the conception about visual representation and mental eye of the self, the religious class has succeeded to fill social imagination with sectarian imagery.

The whole process of cramping of visual space with sectarian outlook can be conceptualized by tapping the rich oral literature in different languages of Gilgit-Baltistan. In Shina language, Ghafoor Chilasi's poetry draws on symbols, metaphors, and similes from local culture and geography. Through his poetry he provides an alternate way of imagining subjective and objective situations in a religiously conservative and culturally rigid society. His poetry is like a memory trapped in boulders but the cri de cœur cracks through the hard surface, and spreads outside to daub the wasteland with beatific visions and hues. It is the poetic imagination that enables him to carve out space for local aesthetic by expanding the cultural metaphors into the minds of people. Such elements provide content for explanation of historical imagination.

Hayden White thinks that there is a deeper or latent content that exists beyond the surface level of historical text. He calls this "the metahistorial element." He claims that this element or content is generally poetic and specifically linguistic in nature.[3] The culturally rooted and multi-meaning metaphors like the ones of Ghafoor Chilasi can be extrapolated to political domain to explain historical, political, social, and subjective processes that cramp visual spaces, imagination, and mental horizons on the one hand, and dry up multiple sources of self and society by injecting static metaphors of world view antithetical to beauty and diversity on the other. In his song "Aldahaq" Ghafoor Chilasi reaches apogee of imagination. He says:

> *Ni jag se kuri zamin makaar thee duur asman theegen,*
> *O waqt nush pashokay teen pashoook giraan theegen.*

> Translation:
> These folks have cramped the space for me in the world,
> And made the heaven inaccessible to me,
> They even cramped my eyescape to have a glimpse of you…

Subjectivity cannot emerge in isolation from broader social, cultural and political processes. Here Ghafoor alludes to the general state of society that suppresses the individual self by turning him into alien inimical to its collective ethos in the name of religion and nation. Not only this, the prevailing ideology in society kills any chance of utopia or imaginative homeland by cramping the visual scape and mental eye-imagination. When these poetic musing are extrapolated into political domain to analyze the liminal state of Gilgit-Baltistan, it becomes clear that the local people have already been uprooted mentally for they lost the

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[3] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

capacity to imagine themselves as distinct community. The region of Gilgit-Baltistan could not extricate itself from the perennial state of liminality because constant feeding on exogenous imagination manufactured to alienate self with his/her homeland and cultural commune cripples its very mind.

The existing social scenario in Gilgit-Baltistan neatly reflects two forms of alienation—active and passive—that Kenyan literary critic Ngugi Wa Thiong'o identifies in his book *Decolonising the Mind*. Ngugi states, "One form is active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment." "On a larger social scale" writes Ngugi "it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies."[4] There are heads of government in Gilgit-Baltistan, but they do not have political bodies like other provinces in Pakistan.

One of the reasons for cultural and epistemic marginalization of Gilgit-Baltistan is breakdown of transmission chain of indigenous knowledge is the rupture created by modern education and knowledge system. The indigenous knowledge and literature of Gilgit-Baltistan was oral. Modernity is a product of written and printed word. With the help of modern schooling and print media, the written word has penetrated into every part of the region. As compared to other regions of Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan has higher literacy rate. This is achieved with the short span of five decades.

Since the written word enables one to progress educationally, economically, and socially, it has been pursued at the cost of oral literacy. So written word has become major source to define self and society. With it the indigenous knowledge disappeared within one generation. On the other hand, absence of modern research institutions in the region resulted in absence of local people in the production of knowledge about their society. Due to the dearth of knowledge production, local people have to rely on the knowledge produced by exogenous entities and centers.

When a society in modern age cannot produce knowledge about itself, lacks cultural industry, and remains politically disenfranchised and mentally alienated from itself, it becomes schizophrenic as it faces two realities in one gaze. Such situation robes the society to negotiate diversity because it faces diversity without the bedrock of its own identity. This precariousness position creates a mindset that tries to internalize the master's image or master narrative to establish itself as master of its own destiny. To avoid repercussions emanating from the lost and divided self, there is a dire need to intervene in every site and source through which the center has succeeded to establish its hegemony.

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[4] Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, (London: James Currey, 1986), 28.

It is modernity and its rationalization that has created ruptures in societies on the margins. One of the salient features of modernity is imposition of boundaries and centralization of knowledge. However, the modern communication technology has to great extent succeeded to defy modern boundaries. Susantha Goonatilake in his essay "The Self Wandering between Cultural Localization and Globalization" thinks that interaction with cultural data in electronic form and people through technology has potential to provide "a new sensitizing metaphor, that cognizes directly the reality of localizing and globalizing process."[5]

In the social setting of Gilgit-Baltistan, the information technology revolution is opening up new vistas by enabling people to cross the boundaries to interact with their own communities who are divided by demarcations of nation states but remain culturally close to the communities across borders, though live on the margins of cultural metropolitans and power centers. In the long run this will prove conducive for the creation of polycenters on the margins. Tariq Banuri thinks that the rejection of centrism, in his case Eurocentrism, opens the way to polycentrism and, next, to a more radical claim for epistemological decentralization. Banuri treats epistemological decentralization as more important issue than economic and legal decentralizations.[6]

The first steps in this regard is dislodging the center, and creation of what Ngugi Wa Thiong'o calls "generative centre" in local loci by liberating the mind and reformulating social imaginary and metaphors. It will help in space clearing for the imagination that stems from the lived experience of local communities not imposed through statist narrative. This can be done by establishing centers of knowledge and cultural production within the peripheries to represent themselves in the world where discourse of knowledge determines the course of societies and contours of cultures. This would also help to create a collective social and historical imaginaire that plays a crucial role in the formation of cultural commune.

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[5] Susantha Goonatilake, "The Self Wandering between Cultural Localization and Globalization," In *The Decolonization of the Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*, edited by Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh, (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd., 1995), 226.

[6] Tariq Banuri, "Modernization and Its Discontents: A Perspective from the Sociology of Knowledge," Working Paper 33, (World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University, 1987), 112.